

Acts 9:1-6
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“Called by God”

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During his life, Rev. Dr. Fred B. Craddock, Jr. served as the Bandy Distinguished Professor of Preaching and New Testament in the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. He tells a story about his father’s resistance to attend church.

“My mother took us to church and Sunday School; my father didn’t go. He complained about Sunday dinner being late when mom came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, “I know what the church wants. The church doesn’t care about me. The Church wants another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge.” That is what Dad would always say.

Sometimes we would have a revival. Our pastor would bring in a guest evangelist and say, “there’s one who needs Jesus now, sic him, get him,” and my father would say the same thing, “the Church doesn’t care about me, they just want another name, another pledge.”

One time though, Dad didn’t say this. He was in veteran’s hospital, and he was down to seventy-three pounds. They had removed his throat and told him “it was too late.” I flew in to see him and he could not talk or eat. I looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stack of cards 20 inches high beside his bed. Even the tray where he would eat if he could, had a flower on it. And all the flowers, all the bedside plants, every card, every blossom were from persons or groups in the church.

He saw me read a card. He took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare, “In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.” I said, “Dad, what is your story?” He wrote, “I was wrong.”

You may be familiar with the story of Saul in the 9th chapter of Acts. Today we meet him on his way along the road to Damascus breathing threats and murder, carrying subpoenas in hand, intended to round up and root out anyone who proclaims Jesus.

On the way he is knocked to the ground by a blinding, divine light and addressed the Risen Christ. It’s a dramatic story where Saul the potent persecutor of the early church, becomes Paul the powerful partner of the Risen Christ.

Paul’s faith is based on his experience with the Risen Christ. During this Season of Eastertide, Marcus Borg uses the language of Resurrection to describe Saul’s transformation saying, “it’s an experience of dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being. Dying to an old identity and being born into a new identity, into an identity in God, in the spirit, in Christ.”

While captured by that divine light Christ asks, “Saul, why do you persecute me?”

On the one hand, it's a question that provokes our thinking about ways we may be persecuting Christ in the world today?

Do we persecute Christ by measuring each other's worth according to accumulated possessions? By treating some people as expendable. By worshipping at earthly altars of power. By refusing to struggle with sinful systems.

Do we persecute Christ through destruction of the environment? Solving our conflicts with violence? Creating poverty? Violating fundamental human rights?

On a more personal level, do we persecute Christ by sacrificing personal Prayer time? Refusing someone who wants to reconcile? Withholding our forgiveness? Judging, criticizing or condemning others? Thinking we know better? Or even by denying God's call when it continues to agitate us? Spiritual agitation may be one of the clearest signs that God's Spirit is working in us, calling us to grow closer to Jesus.

I partly realized this when I went to Seminary in 1992 and more than half of my classmates had already enjoyed long careers. They were a diverse group of students who seemed to hold one thing in common; in some manner each second career student said they had spent much of their life "denying, or running from, or ignoring, or fighting, or suppressing their call to ministry."

Many other students had been very successful, and very faithful in the way they did their secular jobs, sharing the gifts God had given them, and serving God in their church and community. Because of this comfort, success, and ability to serve God they could not believe God would ask them to give up this life, uproot their family, struggle financially, and relearn how to study, organize notes and take tests. Yet, at our opening retreat the weekend before the first semester, there they were, following God's call despite the chaos it caused in the rest of their life.

I have said this before... God's call is not only to ordained ministry. Each of you are special. Each of you are gifted. And each of you are called. God gifts each of us for our callings, as Paul later says, making us invaluable members of the body of Christ.

Yet, we may wonder... how does God's transformation actually happen, what if I did not have a dramatic experience like Paul's? Maybe, like me, you do not have a date, or time when you suddenly gave your life to Jesus. Maybe you never saw a blinding light or talked to the Risen Christ. We hear these stories and they can cause us to wonder if we are really gifted and called? Author Madeline L'Engle speaks into those kinds of moments in life, "Conversion, for me was not a Damascus Road experience. I slowly moved into an intellectual acceptance of what my intuition had always known."

Author Frederick Buechner describes God's in this way, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." God's call is nurtured deep within where we experience profound compassion and empathy. Where we dramatically, or

slowly over time find our life growing closer to Christ Jesus. God's call grows out of an examination of our life, and the church, and the world, as we pay extra close attention to events which break open our heart and put our love into action. That is the place God's Spirit is stirring, blowing, shaping our lives. Much like a tree bent by constant wind, we find ourselves gifted and formed by God's gusty Spirit shaping us to share the good news and serve others with the inclusive love and radical welcome of the Still speaking God, through us.

Amen